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ABSTRACT

Noting that speech instruction as a liberal study must include significant subject matter, rigorous intellectual application, high ethical standards, and responsibility, this paper describes the humanities core course at Allegheny College (Pennsylvania) as providing such a climate for speech instruction. The paper first describes the course goals as helping students to develop an understanding and appreciation of the importance of the humanities, and to further develop writing and speaking skills. The paper then describes the two assignments, from each of the three course terms, that involve oral performance, as well as the accompanying texts and resources. The paper concludes with remarks concerning the value and success of the program made by an evaluator from the National Endowment for the Humanities, from which the college had received a grant for the program. (HTH)

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SPEECH IN THE HUMANITIES CORE COURSE AT ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

When Hostettler made his case for speech as a liberal study, he argued that speech instruction must insist on "significant subject matter, rigorous intellectual application, high ethical standards, responsible communication, and the subordination of techniques to ideas."[1] At Allegheny College, the Humanities Core Course provides just such a climate in which students can develop their speech communication skills.

At Allegheny, the elective Humanities Core Course sections are limited to 20 students. In addition, the faculty for this three term sequence for freshmen provide writing instruction.

Course goals are as follows:

1. To help students develop an understanding and an appreciation of the continuing importance of the humanities.

2. To help the student become more aware of the ways in which the disciplines of the humanities share

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certain aims, values and methods of analysis.

3. To help the student develop an understanding of the relationships which exist among art, literature, drama, philosophy, and music.

4. To provide the student with information which will prove valuable in upper division humanities courses.

5. To provide the student with a basic vocabulary by which he or she can take part in informed discussion in the humanities.

6. To help the student discover, identify, and clarify his or her aesthetic and ethical values.

7. To further develop the students' communication skills:

   -- to write and speak effectively.

   -- to develop rhetorical skills (stating a thesis, organizing thoughts, supporting ideas clearly and convincingly).

   -- to achieve a positive attitude toward an audience.

   -- to analyze, present,and refute an argument.

   -- to read, view, and listen critically.

   -- to develop research skills (using the library, building a bibliography, taking notes, writing extended exposition),[2]

Besides a writer's handbook, the first term texts are Bettelheim's Surviving and Other Essays; Plato's Republic, Shelley's Frankenstein, Sophocles' Antigone and Thoreau's Civil Disobedience. Sporre's Perceiving the Arts is useful

for vocabulary. Films include Holocaust and Night and Fog. In the first term, we concentrate on an examination of ethical and aesthetic values.

Of the eight assignments in the first term, two involve oral performance.

1. We ask the student to prepare a one-point speech on a work of art. The idea to be developed by various kinds of supporting material must be distilled into a single sentence. For instance, "In De Kooning's 'Woman I,' the violence is directed at all women;" or "Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper' illustrates the Renaissance search for harmony."

A short outline is required for this three minute speech. The student is advised to rehearse the speech at least three times aloud and strive for a conversational manner when delivering the talk.

2. The second speech assignment is in response to a reading of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience. The student is asked, "Is civil disobedience ever justified?" Again the student is asked to submit an outline and enjoined to strive for communication with the audience.

Second term, we deal with modes of thought, concentrating primarily on "classical" and "romantic." The texts used are: St. Augustine, Confessions; Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance; Plato, Republic; Racine, Phaedre; Thoreau, Walden; and selected poems from Wordsworth. Films shown are Phaedre and La Boheme.

Second term is a rare treat for the speech teacher, for two of the works discussed involve rhetoric. Pirsig's Zen, about a composition teacher, is a short course in classical rhetoric and provides an excellent opportunity to discuss the principles of rhetoric, logic and dialectic, and the Sophists. Augustine, of course, taught speech, and some time can be spent on his theory of communication. Of the eight assignments, two are oral.

3. The student is asked to improve on the method of that master of dialectic, Socrates, in cross-examining a classmate. First, each student writes a paper presenting a case for a candidate for philosopher-king. Then, the student is subjected to a four minute cross-examination on that choice. Students are asked to develop "logic trees" in which questions and answers are logically related. The rules for cross-examination may be found in any debate textbook and can be easily adapted to this assignment.

4. The student is asked to prepare one of Wordsworth's poems for reading aloud in class. A sonnet is an ideal length, but twenty well-chosen lines from one of the longer poems will do, as well. The poem is introduced by a short statement of the romantic elements to be found in the selection. Eye contact, phrasing, and projection are important elements to be developed by this assignment.

Third term reading includes: Barrett, Irrational Man; Beckett, Waiting for Godot; Camus, Exile and the Kingdom; Dostoevski, Notes from Underground; Kafka, The Metamorphosis; and Woolf, A Room of One's Own. Showings of Bergman's Persona and Seventh Seal bracket the term. In the third term, we search for an answer to the question: What is modern?

Two major oral assignments are scheduled.

5. The first assignment involves participation in a panel discussion or debate on a question or proposition involving modernism. Resolved: That existentialism is an adequate philosophy for today. Resolved: That modern art is a confession of spiritual poverty.

6. The second oral assignment comes at the end of the term and consists of an oral report on the subject of the student's research paper. Figures suitable for the research papers are, among many others, Borges, Brecht, Cage, Martha Graham, Ionesco, O'Keeffe, Schoenberg and Stieglitz.

For the academic year 1980-81, Allegheny College was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to implement a humanities pilot program. The evaluator for the program called it "immensely successful." In his report he addressed the question of oral work.

. . . Several students volunteered to me that they were initially intimidated by the prospect of oral presentations, but later proud of having done them.

> This is an interesting development. The discipline of verbal articulation of ideas, of thinking on one's feet, differs from that of writing in that it has the effect on the novice speaker of being a personal achievement. It also differs from contributing to a discussion in that one is required to sustain one's thought. Finally, the students noted, this approach helped them to become familiar with the views of their peers.[3]

In this period of "practical" public speaking instruction, it is refreshing to observe students embracing speech as a liberal art. Wilson and Arnold, in Public Speaking as a Liberal Art, aptly noted,

> . . . To study man's speech in virtually any aspect frees the mind from parochial concentration upon self, for this study not only proclaims with Socrates, "Know thyself," but admonishes, likewise, "Know others!" So, while it is not deplorable to learn to give public speeches for the sake of future careers, it is more important to learn, through speaking and studying speech making, how it is that mind links to mind through speech, regardless of who you are or what your profession.[4]

Footnotes

[1]Gordon F. Hostettler, "Speech as a Liberal Study," The Pennsylvania Speech Annual XIX (September 1962): p. 25.

[2]Change is status quo for the Allegheny College Humanities Core Course. The course is taught differently each year and the staff changes. Course goals and units are constantly being evaluated. The course goals for the 1982-83 program were developed by Courtenay Dodge (Modern Languages), Carl Heeschen (Art), Nels Juleus (Speech and Drama), and Lloyd Michaels (English).

[3]Ronald A. Carson, "Evaluator's Report," p. 3.

[4]John F. Wilson and Carroll C. Arnold, Public Speaking as a Liberal Art (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1964), p. 4.